

How Russia's neighbours are turning against Putin

The more Vladimir Putin tries to bring post-Soviet states closer to Moscow, the more he repels them. Is the Russian president running out of road?

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Vladimir Putin is fearful. He worries that NATO and the wider West are encircling Russia with hostile populations and governments. This paranoid analysis is one explanation for his deployment of as many as 130,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, a move that could presage a major military assault on the country. Europe may be on the brink of its biggest conflict since the Second World War.

Fourteen states broke away from Russia when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991: the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), as well as countries across eastern Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova), the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan). Today these countries vary enormously in their diplomatic relations, wealth and degree of democracy, but one general trend prevails: the

citizens of almost all the 14 states have tilted away from Russia. “In every direction, peoples who used to see Russia as a friend are turning against it, or more precisely its leadership,” notes Maryan Zabblotskyy, an MP for Ukraine’s governing Servant of the People party.

After the Soviet collapse, ties between the states remained fairly close. Various collective organisations were set up: the Commonwealth of Independent States, established in 1991; the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a post-Soviet answer to Nato founded in 1992; and the Eurasian Economic Union (formerly the Eurasian Economic Community). Many of the newly independent states were led by former Soviet officials. Georgia’s post-independence president Eduard Shevardnadze had been the USSR’s foreign affairs minister. Ukraine’s Leonid Kuchma had served as a local Communist Party chief. In 1994 the *New York Times* reported on a new Russian term for these states: *blizhneye zarubezhye*, or the “near abroad”.

Part of the shift away from Russia since then has been sociological. Across the 14 states, citizens are less likely than their parents to speak Russian (though there are ethnic Russian minorities in many of these countries), and more likely to have travelled to the West, use social media and consume Western news. “Whereas Russia’s hold on the region seemed quite strong in the 1990s and 2000s, now an entire generation has grown up after the Soviet Union collapsed,” notes Paul Stronski, a former US diplomat and expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank. With time, these citizens have developed a stronger sense of nationhood; witness Kyiv’s memorial to the victims of Stalin’s Holodomor famine, opened in 2008. And they have rediscovered national traditions of architecture, art, language, poetry and even religion, as in the case of the revival of the Armenian Apostolic Church after 1991.

Yet the turn against Russia is also a product of Putin’s own aggression. His governments bridled at the pro-democracy “colour revolutions” such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. In early 2007 Putin announced a new era in Russian foreign policy at the Munich Security Conference by denouncing the US’s “almost uncontained hyper-use of force in international relations”. A couple of months later, Estonia was hit by a huge Russian cyber attack. In 2008 talk of Ukraine and Georgia

becoming NATO members prompted Putin to send troops into the latter in a five-day invasion. Then, in 2014, came Ukraine's pro-Western Maidan revolution. Putin responded by annexing Crimea and occupying much of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

Almost a decade later, and with his troops once more massing on Ukraine's borders, Putin is right that his country's neighbours are turning away from Russia. But he is wrong about the cause: the blame lies not with NATO, but with his own belligerence.

Survey the picture today, travelling anti-clockwise around the Russian border, and a remarkable sweep of alienation emerges. Start with the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania pivoted quickly to the West after the fall of the Soviet Union, and joined the EU and NATO in 2004. For years they did not host NATO troops, but that changed after Russia's assault on Ukraine in 2014, when the alliance deployed a deterrent "enhanced forward presence" in all three states. "Paradoxically, since Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin 20 years ago, Russia's ability to influence or even destabilise the Baltic states has decreased," writes the foreign policy expert Una Bergmane. To the north, Sweden and Finland, long proud of their neutrality, are now considering whether to join NATO – another defensive reaction to Putin's aggression.

In Belarus, the picture is different. Alexander Lukashenko, a former Soviet official, continues to rule as a dictator. Yet he is increasingly at odds with the Belarusian people. During the 2020 election, the opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya – who is typical of the new social media-savvy, English-speaking generation of younger politicians that grew up after the fall of the Soviet Union – attracted huge support (she was viewed by independent observers as the legitimate winner). Lukashenko turned to Putin to prop up his regime. The opposition was crushed but, in the process, came to despise Russian military force: "Because the Kremlin supported the regime following these fraudulent elections – supported violence and the torture of Belarusians – of course attitudes towards the Kremlin have changed a lot," Tikhanovskaya told the *New Statesman* in November.

As for Ukraine, a 2011 Pew poll put the proportion of respondents with "favourable views of Russia" at 84 per cent. But following the annexation of

Crimea and the occupation in the Donbas in 2014, this had plummeted to 32 per cent by 2019.

This attitude is mirrored in economic shifts. “There has been a reorientation of the Ukrainian economy towards the West since 2014,” says Maria Repko of the Centre for Economic Strategy in Kyiv. “The share of trade with the Commonwealth of Independent States has fallen from 39 per cent in 2011 to 10 per cent in 2020.” Thanks to an EU-Ukraine association agreement, Ukraine has been wired into the EU’s supply chains. Samuel Charap of the Rand Corporation adds: “Ukraine stands out as a foreign failure of unique proportions for Russia... [Russia] has so utterly failed to get what it wants through rational statecraft that it is prepared to launch a massive invasion to pursue its interests.”

In tiny Moldova, wedged between Ukraine and Romania, both Russia and the West have been vying for influence in recent decades. But the country’s pro-Western opposition took power in 2009 and, since then, the country has been led by governments committed to “Europeanisation”. Its current administration, elected last summer, has explicitly committed to a pro-EU course.

In the South Caucasus, Russia’s 2008 attack on Georgia only strengthened Tbilisi’s commitment to eventual EU and Nato membership. Armenia, surrounded by foes, has long looked to Moscow for protection, but its attitude has cooled over the Kremlin’s support for Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. And while Azerbaijan now looks like Russia’s last remaining staunch ally between the Black and Caspian seas, it considers Turkey to be its closest partner.

Cross the Caspian from Azerbaijan and you reach Central Asia. Here, the most significant recent shifts have played out in Kazakhstan, the wealthiest and most powerful of the region’s post-Soviet states. On 2 January protests broke out in the city of Zhanaozen over the lifting of a fuel price cap. Demonstrations spread across the country, prompting President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to call in troops from the CSTO (the military bloc created by Russia in 1992) to prop up his regime.

A Russia-backed mission to suppress protests against Tokayev will doubtless stir resentment among Kazakhs. “The gap between populations and governments

on Russia is huge across the region,” says Stronski. In any case, Kazakhs have been turning away from Russia for years, he adds: they are more confident of their national identity; less likely to speak Russian; and are forming closer ties with China, the West and Turkey.

Russia’s post-Soviet neighbours are withdrawing from the old centre. A recent survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations finds: “Most diplomats who worked at the foreign ministries of Eastern Partnership countries [a grouping of eastern European and South Caucasus governments] in the late 1990s and early 2000s regard Russia with nostalgia for their student days and as a tough but important ally. However, younger diplomats have a dramatically different view. Russia has failed in its attempts to win its neighbours’ love with the use of military force.”

The major distinction between the 14 states is whether their leaders are working with that bottom-up change or against it. The democratic Baltics and mostly democratic states of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are pulling away from Russia. Meanwhile, in Belarus and Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Russia-friendly autocrats depend heavily on Moscow’s military support. “We are seeing how Russia is trying to keep these regimes in power,” says Stefan Meister, of the German Council on Foreign Relations. He predicts that this conflict between pro-democracy populations and Russia-backed autocrats will grow. “Societies will further develop in emancipation from these regimes, so the regimes will develop new tools to keep control.” He envisages Russia and its clients in states such as Belarus and Kazakhstan increasingly applying Chinese methods of surveillance and control.

Understanding this shift is essential to understanding Moscow’s threat towards Kyiv. When Putin looks at Ukraine, he sees a country once open to Russia but now committed to the West. When he looks at most of the other states bordering Russia, he sees nations where people have been so alienated by his regime that they have either voted out pro-Moscow governments or are taking to the streets to protest against them. And when he looks at Russia itself, he sees support for his United Russia party declining; protests inspired by the likes of the imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny; and the state resorting to more severe methods of oppression.

Yet the paradox is that the more Putin attempts to bring countries closer to Moscow, the more he repels them. And the more that this happens, the more he will deploy military force to shore up autocrats willing to defy their people. As Charap puts it: “Russia’s influence is waning. Partly organically, partly because of Russia’s ham-fisted policies, and partly because of Western strategy to give these countries alternatives. Russia cannot live with that outcome, and is prepared to use force to protect its influence.”

From year to year, it may look as if Putin is mastering geopolitics and setting the agenda. But grand strategy is about more than what happens year to year. From any sort of wider, long-term historical perspective, Russia’s president is running out of road; his sphere of influence is shrinking.